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Guidelines for Writing a Book Review: Through the Lens of the First-Year Doctoral Student Experience

DILARA ORYNBASSAROVA

Writing a critical book review is an integral part of the scholarly development process of any emerging researcher. The payoff of writing a book review is great, as it helps the emerging scholar to sharpen both writing and critical thinking skills, and understand the process of writing and editing a book. A critical review of the book may include a brief yet effective summary of the book; the relevance of the ideas today in general; a thorough analysis of the author's main concepts and ideas, including the discussion about the authors' main arguments, how and why the author has put the book together in such away, how well the author has supported ideas and facts; and discussion of the book's strengths and weaknesses, which may include the overall content, organization, style and application to a certain context. Mentioning whether the author has achieved the stated purpose of the book is also important. For example, you may find this information in the preface or the introduction part of the book. My personal experience of writing a critical book review indicates that the process has three stages: before, during and after.

Before reading the book, I would suggest first looking for and paying attention to the book's overall design, cover page, publisher and the year of publication, the table of contents, introduction, the preface, the index, and whether it is a single-author written or a collection of articles compiled by an editor. In this way, you get an overall first impression of the book that will help you guide and stay focused throughout the whole process of the book review.

Writing a book review helps the emerging scholar to sharpen both writing and critical thinking skills, and understand the process of writing and editing a book.

While reading the book, it is crucial to develop a good note-taking sheet. Depending on your individuality, you may choose to use either markers or stickers, or a computer based (typing quotes from the book) or hard copy sheet note-taking. You may also find it useful to note the main arguments of each book's chapter. Don't forget to put page numbers! After reading each chapter of the book, you may find it helpful to think of what part of each section kept your attention most. It might be the author's or editor's style and organization of chapter writing, provision of strong and convincing or ineffective and weak arguments, the tone of writing employed by the author, or the application of illustrations that helped you as a reader to comprehend the information easily. I believe an important aspect to pay attention to is staying delicate and professional while intelligently providing the criticism and highlighting the book's weaknesses. Furthermore, it is helpful to think of the audience whom the book is targeted to, whether that audience might be those with advanced degrees or those with basic education, and think whether the book might be useful or not useful enough to these particular ranges of audience. If you have read some other books in this field, you may think of how this book compares to other books in the field, and what its main contribution is.

After reading the book, and before starting to write the review of the book you may find it helpful to develop an outline of your book review, for instance, the table of contents might help in this case. How much does it take to review a book? It depends on reader's availability of time, the speed of reading, the purpose of book review and other factors; and may range from three weeks up to six months and more.

In closing, there are no universal strategies and guidelines for writing a successful critical book review. You should develop your own techniques and strategies of writing a book review based on your individual writing style and preference. The tips provided in this editorial may serve as the first step in doing so. Good luck!